

Reconciliation Made Sound: Madjitol Moorna's Experience of Harmony and Healing*

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Music both articulates and offers the immediate experience of collective identity ... In responding to a song, to a sound, we are drawn into affective and emotional alliances ... Music is especially important for our sense of ourselves because of its unique emotional intensity—we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies ... Identity is always an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are ... What makes music special is that musical identity is both fantastic—idealizing not just oneself but also the social world one inhabits—and real: it is enacted in activity.¹

In this quote, musicologist Simon Frith captures the link between music and identity, drawing attention to music's ability to craft affective and emotional alliances. He does not,

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¹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 273–74, cited in Ellaine Lally, "'The Power to Heal us with a Smile and a Song': Senior Wellbeing, Music-based Participatory Arts and the Value of Qualitative Evidence,' *Journal of Arts and Communities* 1.1 (2005): 30.

however, explain explicitly how this might come about, particularly in relation to intercultural engagements that address social inequities. On the other hand, Ian Cross argues that social justice is not produced by music-making in itself, but is rather made manifest through its capacity for shared intentionality: that is, musical activity provides 'space for the emergence of concepts that bear on how humans can, and ultimately perhaps should, interact.'² In his conclusion, Cross notes Inga Clendinnen's comment, in *Dancing with Strangers: Europeans and Australians at First Contact*, that culture is a dynamic system of shared meanings that are rarely made explicit, and in cross-cultural engagements 'understanding another culture's meanings is and will always be a hazardous enterprise.'³ Nevertheless, Cross argues, the dance that took place at first contact enabled members of two cultures to 'believe that they could begin to know' something of each other.⁴ Some 220 years later, in a very different social, cultural, economic and political climate to that of first contact, trying to build understanding across and between the cultures of settler and Indigenous Australia remains a somewhat hazardous enterprise.

In this article I examine these issues via a study of the socio-musical interactions of the Perth based community choir Madjtil Moorna (*Noongar* for 'Magical Sounds of the Bush').⁵ I joined the choir for three months in 2010 as part of my doctoral field research,⁶ and rehearsed, performed and socialised as a member of the choir. As both singer and researcher, I was able to draw on my own experiences as well as those of other members of the choir, with whom I developed personal relationships. This article is, therefore, based on data drawn from a broad range of sources, including participant observation, personal conversations, unstructured interviews, field recordings, field notes, journal entries, archival material and commercial recordings.

This article particularly explores the concepts of harmony and healing, considering their expression within Madjtil Moorna and their relationship to reconciliation, by concentrating on the *Sorry Song*, first written in 1998 by the Perth-based singer-songwriter Kerry Fletcher, and later revised following The Apology to the Stolen Generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 13 February 2008.⁷ To begin, I shall examine the reconciliation process, music and community choirs.

The relationship between the Indigenous Australian minority and the non-Indigenous majority, and the need for an officially sanctioned process of reconciliation, has been a

² Ian Cross, 'Music and Social Being,' *Musicology Australia* 28.1 (2005–6): 124.

³ Cross, 'Music and Social Being,' 124.

⁴ Cross, 'Music and Social Being,' 125.

⁵ *Noongar* is the common language across South West Western Australia with many dialects found throughout the region. 'Magical sounds of the bush' is a translation that has generated some debate, but is beyond the scope of this article to discuss in detail.

⁶ The research project is multi-sited but this article concentrates solely on Madjtil Moorna.

⁷ Henceforth referred to as 'The Apology.' Various State Government laws had prescribed the removal of Indigenous children from their families over a significant time span, beginning in the late nineteenth century and up to and including the 1970s. The children who were taken away are now referred to as the Stolen Generations. On 13 February 2008, the then newly elected Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, said 'sorry' to the Indigenous peoples of the country. The Apology to the Stolen Generations was for many Australians a long time coming. The previous Government, led by John Howard, had refused to formally apologise, despite increasing pressure since Sorry Day in 1998. For a fuller discussion of the The Apology see Isabelle Auguste, 'On the Significance of Saying "Sorry": Apology and Reconciliation in Australia,' *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia*, ed. F. Peters-Little, A. Curthoys and J. Docker (Canberra: ANU E Press and Aboriginal History Incorporated, 2010), 309–24.

recurrent concern in Australian politics during the last two decades.⁸ The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established in 1991, and a non-government foundation was subsequently formed to educate the broad Australian community on Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations. Over this time, the focus has moved from the investigation of a social history of disadvantage to the mobilisation of change in national attitudes,⁹ or ‘from hostility and conflict to mutual acceptance, respect, and future cooperation.’¹⁰ The Apology was an historical and symbolic moment in this process, which promised a new beginning for racial relations.

The disruptive impact on Indigenous lives caused by European settlement is now commonly heard from Indigenous and other perspectives. As Francesca Merlan points out, such accounts reveal the social complexity and creativity of Indigenous responses to colonisation, and challenge simple views of societal collapse or unchanging social orders.¹¹ Since the 1970s, the intensification of Indigenous activism has been accompanied by more assertive Indigenous consciousness in music, drama, film and other art forms, which present an interpretation of Australian history that can be confronting, especially to mainstream Australia. Within this body of artistic work, contemporary music has often been the vehicle ‘for the expression of ... anger and pride, political protest and profound optimism.’¹² As Robin Ryan has observed, ‘Songs are not divided from contemporary Aboriginal life; they just bleed out of it as a creative response to more than two centuries of powerlessness.’¹³

Merlan notes that successful Indigenous protests are often the product of focused collaborations between Indigenous social actors and others who supported the struggles.¹⁴ Within this arena several important collaborations between professional Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians have emerged. For example, popular songs such as *From Little Things, Big Things Grow* by Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly have been claimed to show ‘respectful collaborations between black and white artists: authentic examples of reconciliation in action.’¹⁵ The Black Arm Band is a group of established and emerging Indigenous musicians including Lou Bennett and Archie Roach, together with a few non-Indigenous musicians including

⁸ See, for instance, Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, eds, *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (North Carlton: Arena Publications Australia, 2007); Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, eds, *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010); Ann Ingamells, ‘Closing the Gap: Some Unsettling Assumptions,’ *Journal of Social Inclusion* 1.1 (2010): 7–22; Francesca Merlan, ‘Indigenous Movements in Australia,’ *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 473–94; Damien Short, ‘Reconciliation, Assimilation, and the Indigenous Peoples of Australia,’ *International Political Science Review* 24.4 (2003): 491–513; Graham Young, ‘Reconciliation to a European Dreaming?’ *ON LINE opinion – Australia’s e-journal of social and political debate*, accessed 10 Nov. 2009, <www.onlineopinion.com.au/print.asp?article=3133>.

⁹ Merlan, ‘Indigenous Movements in Australia,’ 486–87.

¹⁰ Emina Subasic and Katherine J. Reynolds, ‘Beyond “Practical” Reconciliation: Intergroup Inequality and the Meaning of Non-Indigenous Identity,’ *Political Psychology* 30.2 (2009): 245.

¹¹ Merlan, ‘Indigenous Movements in Australia,’ 486.

¹² Ross W. Prior, ‘Editorial,’ *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* 1.1 (2010): 1.

¹³ Robin Ryan, ‘Educational Perspectives on Indigenous Country Music: Review Article of Clinton Walker’s *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music* (Annandale, NSW: Pluto Press, 2000) and associated multimedia resources,’ *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 29.1 (2001): 43.

¹⁴ Merlan, ‘Indigenous Movements in Australia,’ 486.

¹⁵ Prior, ‘Editorial,’ 1.

Shane Howard.¹⁶ The band presents music arising from the Australian Indigenous experience. It claims to 'develop, perform, promote and celebrate contemporary Australian Indigenous music as a symbol of resilience and hope in the spirit and action of reconciliation.'¹⁷ The Black Arm Band has created two major projects: *murundak*, which honoured Indigenous Australia's struggle for civil rights and the music that it generated, and *Hidden Republic*, which turned the gaze forward.

Similar collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians also take place in community music projects, including community choirs. Although community choral projects have sometimes been dismissed as inauthentic acts of ideological celebration 'devoid of pleasure, meaning or significance',¹⁸ they can create a social and musical environment that brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in an overt act of reconciliation. Community choirs can therefore represent a musical and social exploration of the 'shared knowledge and imaginings of "reconciliation"'.¹⁹

Community choirs provide opportunities for singers to experience the 'cultural inter-relatedness' that Marcia Langton argues is necessary for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to overcome the assumption of the undifferentiated 'other' and, through a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation, to enable dynamic constructions of the 'other'.²⁰ As Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson argue, 'Unlike other forms of knowledge, music emphasises what is fluid and inchoate, and thus has the capacity to break down boundaries and to forge new agendas, alliances and exchanges.'²¹ Nicholas Cook has similarly pointed out that:

music becomes a way not only of gaining some understanding of the cultural other, but also of shifting your own position, constructing and reconstructing your own identity in the process. Music, in short, represents a way out of cultural pessimism.²²

Community choirs can also provide people with the opportunity to step into the 'unfinished'²³ journey of reconciliation through singing. While ordinary people may have little opportunity to influence the official political process of reconciliation, Patrick Dodson argues that 'personal instruments of reconciliation are potent and within the realm of influence.'²⁴ At the same time, community choirs can also highlight Ase Ottosson's assertion that blending

¹⁶ The Black Arm Band was named in response to former Prime Minister John Howard's description of the 'black arm' version of Australian history. Shane Howard was the leader of the folk rock group Goanna and the composer of the iconic 1980s hit *Solid Rock*. Coincidentally, a concert at 'The Other Side of the Rock' Carnival at Mutitjulu recently celebrated the song's thirtieth anniversary.

¹⁷ *Black Arm Band*, accessed 7 June 2009, <www.blackarmband.com.au/>.

¹⁸ Martin Stokes, 'Music and the Global Order,' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 6.

¹⁹ Martha Augoustinos and Sharyn Lee Penny, 'Reconciliation: The Genesis of a New Social Representation,' *Papers on Social Representations* 10 (2001): 4.16.

²⁰ Marcia Langton, *Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television': An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993).

²¹ Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson, *Deadly Sounds, Deadly Places: Contemporary Aboriginal music in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2004), 84.

²² Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 30.

²³ Patrick Dodson, 'Whatever Happened to Reconciliation?' *Coercive Reconciliation*, ed. Altman and Hinkson, 21–29.

²⁴ Dodson, 'Whatever Happened to Reconciliation?' 27.

'notions of cultural and racial difference with notions of interculturally emerging social practice and identities ... is a paradox at the heart of the politicized landscape ... of reconciliation.'²⁵

Popular discourse within the arts industry, government policy and academic research associates community choirs with individual and social wellbeing, a view that is often passionately articulated and reinforced in the media.²⁶ Notions of harmony and healing are central in these discussion. These two notions are often closely linked but I would like to consider these concepts separately.

The musicological and metaphorical term 'harmony' is a useful trope to describe an ideal of vocal, social and psycho-physiological resonance and vitality. It is often employed to describe the power of combined voices to give a musical representation of social inclusion and cohesion that can improve individual and community wellbeing. Community choirs are therefore regarded as potent sites where harmony is embodied, and which can be measured and evaluated to provide scientific evidence of the benefits of participation.²⁷ While scientific evidence is crucial in a full understanding of the physiological connection between singing and wellbeing,²⁸ these sometimes colourless sets of data can silence the human stories and complexities behind the singing, behind the choirs.²⁹

The experience of many a choral leader and chorister often does not meet this ideal. Adjustments need to be made to achieve vocal and social harmony within a group; the out-of-tune and the out-of-time need to be worked through; dissonant moments need to be settled;

²⁵ Ase Ottosson, 'Aboriginal Music and Passion: Interculturality and Difference in Australian Desert Towns,' *Ethnos* 75.3 (2010): 277.

²⁶ I addressed this issue in greater depth in 'Revoicing the Voices: The Community Singing Movement in Australia,' *Instruments of Change: IASPM-ANZ (International Association for the Study of Popular Music-Australia New Zealand) Conference*, 24–26 Nov. 2010, Monash University, Melbourne.

²⁷ See, for instance, Stephen Clift, 'Amateur Group Singing for Wellbeing and Health,' accessed 14 Apr. 2010, <songsofresilience.wikispaces.com/Amateur+group+singing+for+wellbeing+and+health>; S. Clift, G. Hancox, I. Morrison, B. Hess, G. Kreutz, and D. Stewart, 'Choral Singing and Psychological Wellbeing: Quantitative and Qualitative Findings from English choirs in a Cross-National Survey,' *Journal of Applied Arts and Health* 1.1 (2010): 19–34; S. Clift, G. Hancox, I. Morrison, B. Hess, D. Stewart, and G. Kreutz, *Choral Singing, Wellbeing and Health: Findings from a cross-national Survey* (Folkestone: Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University, University Centre Folkestone, UK, 2010); Jane Davidson, 'Singing for Self-healing, Health and Wellbeing,' *Music Council of Australia Forum* (Music Council of Australia, 2008); Steve Dillon, 'Accessing the Positive Influence of Music Activities in Community Development Programs,' *Music Education Research* 8.2 (2006): 267–80; Heather Gridley, 'Community Art and Health Promotion,' *Anima, Indonesian Psychological Journal* 23.4 (2008): 301–306; Jon Hawkes, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning* (Melbourne: Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd in association with the Cultural Development Network [Vic], 2001); Dawn Joseph, 'Sharing Music and Culture through Singing in Australia,' *International Journal of Community Music* 2.2–3 (2009): 169–81; Lally, 'Power to Heal Us,' 25–44; Thomas W. Langston and Margaret S. Barrett, 'Capitalizing on Community Music: A Case Study of the Manifestation of Social Capital in a Community Choir,' *Research in Music Education* 30.2 (2008): 118–38; Deborah Mills and Paul Brown, *Art and Wellbeing: A Guide to the Connections between Community Cultural Development and Health, Ecologically Sustainable Development, Public House and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity* (Sydney: Australia Council for the Arts, Commonwealth of Australia, 2004); Matthew Shipton and Evangelos Himonides, *Proceedings SEMPRES Conference 'Striking a Chord': Music Health and Wellbeing* (Folkestone: Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University, University Centre Folkestone, UK, 2011); Jocelyn Wolfe, 'Winning Goals in Community Music,' *Music Forum/Music Council of Australia* 8 (Feb.–Apr. 2009): 53–54.

²⁸ As pointed out by Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg in "'Striking a Chord": Music, Health and Wellbeing: Current Developments in Research and Practice,' *Approaches* 3.2 (2011): 122.

²⁹ I give this greater consideration in my forthcoming doctoral thesis.

there is a need to get 'into the groove' so as to resolve into harmony, both musically and socially. The purchase of the notion of harmony, however, often results in the tensions generated by the diversity and particularity of personal histories and expectations being overlooked.

The notion of healing, like harmony, needs to be more fully contextualised. In an article that questions the validity of some of the research on mental health and wellbeing, Pauline Guerin, Bernard Guerin, Deirdre Tedmanson and Yvonne Clark argue that social analysts and scientists have become entrenched in the need to identify 'a general pathway that causes or creates the benefits from engaging in a [musical] activity.'³⁰ They maintain, however, that engagement actually changes the social context. Research into the relationship between community music and healing needs, therefore, to include 'delicate and detailed descriptions of social, historical, economic and cultural contexts' of those involved in community choirs; attention should be given to the complex elements related to an individual's musical participation and the apparent benefits.³¹

According to Tamara Mackean, The Apology created a climate appropriate for a healing journey that would not only deliver better lives for Indigenous peoples, but 'is essential for the wellbeing of Australia as a nation.'³² She argued, however, that the multiple determinants of Indigenous health needed to be addressed in order for Australia to become a healed nation. Mackean recognised that healing means different things to different people, but succinctly suggested that healing is mostly about renewal. Renewal, she argued, must include the resolution of the impact on health of cultural dislocation, dispossession, loss of autonomy, social exclusion, racism and marginalisation.³³ Renewal requires not just the physical wellbeing of the individual but the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole community and, for Indigenous peoples in particular, this includes cultural and spiritual elements and a connection or re-connection to country and family.

Connecting Indigenous notions of healing and music directly, Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg specifically examined the effect of choral singing on wellbeing in an Aboriginal choir in Hopevale in Northern Queensland.³⁴ The ethnographic methodology adopted by Swijghuisen Reigersberg enabled her to conclude that the enjoyment, temporary relief from social burdens, facilitation of cross-cultural fellowship, pride, connection to country, spiritual expression, sense of identity, and enhanced self-esteem that choral singing brought were evidence of wellbeing.³⁵ Notably, she argued that these effects are historically and locally contextual and cannot be readily replicated.

The historical and local context of Madjtil Moorna is likewise unique to itself and, as will be discussed, nods to what Cross suggested is made possible by music making: underwriting

³⁰ Pauline Guerin, Bernard Guerin, Deirdre Tedmanson and Yvonne Clark, 'How Can Country, Spirituality, Music and Arts Contribute to Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing?' *Australasian Psychiatry* 19.1 (2011): S39.

³¹ Guerin, Guerin, Tedmanson and Clark, 'Country, Spirituality, Music,' S40.

³² Tamara Mackean, 'A Healed and Healthy Country: Understanding Healing for Indigenous Australians,' *Medical Journal of Australia* 190.10 (2009): 522.

³³ Mackean, 'A Healed and Healthy Country,' 522.

³⁴ Muriel Swijghuisen Reigersberg, 'Choral Singing and the Construction of Australian Aboriginal Identities: An Applied Ethnomusicological Study in Hopevale, Northern Queensland, Australia,' PhD thesis, Roehampton University, 2009.

³⁵ Swijghuisen Reigersberg, 'Choral Singing,' 297–98.

social flexibility and facilitating intellectual flexibility.³⁶ Madjtil Moorna began as a festival choir for the 2006 Zig Zag Community Festival, an annual event that takes place in the Kalamunda Shire in the hills of Perth. The Zig Zag Community Arts Board recognised a lack of engagement by local Indigenous people in the Festival and sought suggestions to attract their participation. Through a workshop process it was decided to create an Indigenous choir. Jo Randell, a long-term community musician and arts activist, took on the responsibility of organising Indigenous musicians to lead a commissioned festival event and called for singers. Those most attracted by the promotion of the festival choir, however, were non-Indigenous. As this was not the original intent, the choir was restructured, and in line with a belief in the power of music to bring diverse people together, a reconciliation choir for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people was created. Following its success at the festival it subsequently continued as an ongoing choir. Randell believes the choir exists to represent and bridge the gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; that it is 'the essence of community working together for good.'³⁷

The choir actively encourages Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to come together to sing 'aboriginal songs.'³⁸ In its own words, the choir promotes singing, learning and healing by 'bringing cultures together.'³⁹ Despite ongoing Indigenous musical direction, holding the weekly rehearsals in an area of Kalamunda Shire with a significant Indigenous population, and ongoing attempts to attract their participation, however, Indigenous singers continue to be in the minority.

Randell is the choir's coordinator and works tirelessly, maintaining close connections with the Indigenous musical directors, cultural liaisons and the non-Indigenous administrative committee; networking with organisations and institutions; and promoting the choir and its endeavours. With assistance from other choir members, she has attracted significant funding for the choir's leadership costs and activities. In recognition of her work with Madjtil Moorna, Randell received the Music Council of Australia's Music in Communities National Reconciliation Award in 2011. Randell manages the day-to-day business of the choir and is inspired by its evolution, its ability to

just go along, go with the flow, where the energy is, where the invitations are. We respond. And we're led by Aboriginal directors who can come and go as they please. There are no contracts ... It's all done on trust.⁴⁰

Walking the tightrope of cultural and social politics is simply part of the journey of Madjtil Moorna. As the choir prolongs its evolution, Randell has become increasingly conscious of intercultural and cross-cultural protocols. She sees friction as part of 'the enormity of what we're dealing with'⁴¹ in relation to cross-cultural relationships. Overall, she declares that 'there's been a number of rocky things over the years, all to do with language and culture. We've all

³⁶ Cross, 'Music and Social Being,' 123.

³⁷ Jo Randell, interview with author, 31 May 2010.

³⁸ The term 'aboriginal songs' is loosely applied, but generally suggests songs composed by Indigenous musicians and/or songs written from an Indigenous perspective.

³⁹ This phrase forms part of the logo displayed on newsletters and press releases (see, for example, <www.madjtilmoorna.org.au/news/newsletter2012aug.pdf>).

⁴⁰ Randell, interview.

⁴¹ Randell, interview.

learnt to get over those and mostly it's been great.⁴² The tensions and negotiations are 'almost symbols of what we're doing. Those little incidences. And as long as we handle them well we do grow. It is a microcosm of what's going on [in the broader reconciliation process].'⁴³

Della Rae Morrison has led the choir since its 2006 debut at the Zig Zag Festival, sharing the musical direction with Jessie Lloyd and later, George Walley. Morrison is *Noongar* and Lloyd a *Murri* from North Queensland. As the band *Djiva*,⁴⁴ Morrison and Lloyd have received both National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) and Western Australia Music Industry (WAMi) awards. Morrison was born into a musical family and began singing in a choir in primary school. She later sang in a duo with her brother, and was a member of the Yirra Yarkin Aboriginal Choir and Theatre Company. She played a role in the stage production of *Bran Nue Day* in the 1990s.

Lloyd and Morrison are experienced music promoters and together directed South West Aboriginal Entertainment (SWAE). They are also experienced community singing leaders. In the mid-1990s, Morrison taught the Coexistence Choir *Universal Love* by Lilly Radloff and Kathy Travers. It was the song she had sung in *Bratwurst and Damper*, a production staged by Deckchair Theatre in Fremantle.⁴⁵ Morrison and Lloyd led the group Yowarliny at Yirra Yarkin and have facilitated choral projects in a number of communities in Western Australia. They brought some of their established repertoire to Matjital Moorna. Lloyd also passed on the songs and stories from her own family and other communities based in Queensland, in the oral tradition to which she was accustomed. Alert also to the exotic attraction of Torres Strait Islander songs she introduced the choir to *Kulba Yaday* and other songs from that region.

As the first musical directors of Madjital Moorna, Morrison and Lloyd were pivotal to its success. They appreciated the enthusiasm within the festival choir and the opportunities for more regular performances that saw it evolve into a community choir. As Morrison described, the choir was 'on a roll,'⁴⁶ and growing. She enjoyed being part of its non-competitive and supportive nature, with many like-minded members. There were layers and dimensions within the whole choir that she admired.

Lloyd and Morrison are, at the same time, well aware of the tensions inherent in Madjital Moorna's structure. They have commented on its lack of appeal to many Indigenous people because it did not emerge from the everyday of known community. Lloyd and Morrison have also spoken about the politics of performing Indigenous songs, the awkward inclusion of Indigeneity into some of the repertoire, the insistence upon and sometimes difficult maintenance of Indigenous musical leadership, and its attraction to organisations for symbolic performances of reconciliation.⁴⁷

While Madjital Moorna's performances have generally been well received by audiences gathered for the purpose of celebrating reconciliation, responses have not been universally positive. While many audience members respond enthusiastically to the choir's performances,

⁴² Randell, interview.

⁴³ Randell, interview.

⁴⁴ *Noongar* for 'Mother Earth.'

⁴⁵ Morrison played the role of the mother in the theatre production.

⁴⁶ Della Rae Morrison, interview with author, 1 Feb. 2010.

⁴⁷ Jessie Lloyd, interview with author, 14 Jan. 2010; Morrison, interview.

some non-Indigenous audience members expressed a certain cynicism about its performances, claiming that the choir was merely contrived. The response of Indigenous people to the choir's performances is likewise mixed. Morrison acknowledged that responses varied and pointed out that some *Noongar* people could find it 'confronting to see whites knowing the [Aboriginal] song.'⁴⁸ Randell saw this as an unfortunate but understandable response to the loss of language and culture through the colonisation process. Morrison further commented, however, that she had witnessed this negative attitude change during performances, seeing it dissolve 'because the beauty of the song can't be held on to [by Aboriginal people only].'⁴⁹

George Walley, who began his musical direction in 2009, views 'Madjitol Moorna as a way to live reconciliation through music.'⁵⁰ With no previous community singing leadership experience Walley, who is also *Noongar*, has brought a collaborative approach to the choir's music-making. The increasing absence of Morrison has meant that Walley has become the anchor for musical direction. Walley plays guitar, sings and supports the choir with its musical training. Though his casual and generous leadership style is valued in many ways, the absence of a strong conductor challenges those members who are less musically confident. Walley believes the choir should be open to change and 'new ways of doing things and looking at things,' and so has encouraged Randell to bring in other Indigenous musicians to work with the choir.⁵¹

Increasingly, various Indigenous musicians are invited to work with Madjitol Moorna, either on a long or short term basis, exposing the choir to a diversity of musical expression and musical leadership. In 2011, Gina Williams, a *Ballandong Noongar* with *Kija* heritage,⁵² who is also a WAMi award-winning singer-songwriter, worked with the choir. Others have included Josie Boyle, Candice Lorrae Dempsey (Ulla Shay) and Karla Hart.⁵³ All musical directors not only bring music to the choir but share their own culture and their lived experience.

Madjitol Moorna performs at numerous community events, festivals and corporate functions throughout Perth and beyond, with a 'small but mighty choir' of up to about thirty singers.⁵⁴ It has a busy annual program,⁵⁵ with Reconciliation and NAIDOC Weeks important commitments for the choir. The choir's sometimes demanding schedule is made possible by an expectation that members will attend when and where possible. This ethos also accommodates the diverse musical direction and the fluidity of singer numbers. While good performances are encouraged, being in tune and in time is less important than sharing songs, and the fun and harmony enjoyed by 'people from various racial and cultural backgrounds singing together, led by strong Aboriginal musicians.'⁵⁶ The choir's intention

⁴⁸ Morrison, interview.

⁴⁹ Morrison, interview.

⁵⁰ Madjitol Moorna, *Madjitol Moorna Songbook* (Kalamunda: Madjitol Moorna, 2009), 8.

⁵¹ George Walley, interview with author, 27 May 2010.

⁵² A language group based in the East Kimberley, Western Australia.

⁵³ Randell, personal communication (2011 Coordinator's Report and emails 12 Apr. and 5 Aug. 2012).

⁵⁴ Robyn Clarke, 'A small but mighty choir sings "SORRY" and participates in Australia's National Apology,' unpublished document 2008, in possession of the author.

⁵⁵ For example, in 2009 they had some forty performances.

⁵⁶ Pauline Vigus, 'Application for Music in Communities Award,' unpublished document, 2010, in possession of the author.

is to support healing and to communicate 'its message of reconciliation ... with the wider community.'⁵⁷

Choir members are encouraged to adopt various leadership roles, and some of the Indigenous singers exercise leadership in teaching and cultural liaison. 'Aunty' Karl Mourach, Madjartil Moorna's 'significant senior',⁵⁸ and 'the spiritual heart of the choir',⁵⁹ is a member of the Stolen Generations. Her personal journey both frames and guides Madjartil Moorna's socio-musical project. Mourach was taken from her family, placed in a mission, and later sexually abused by the family with whom she was placed. Her brother was denied access when he tried to contact her in his young adulthood. Mourach, a member of the choir from its beginning, was instrumental in developing the choir's name, vision and logo. The choir has had a significant impact on her life, increasing her passion for *Noongar* language and culture, singing with others, and sharing her story as a member of the Stolen Generations, an experience which she believes provides a reference point for a 'deep understanding of the community's need to heal and reconcile.'⁶⁰ She is devoted to 'spreading healing vibrations through singing',⁶¹ and knows she is

valued as one of the few Aboriginal members. We are always looking for more. I understand why some don't stay, but it is a Catch 22. Some people come. They don't see a lot of Aboriginal people there so they don't come back.⁶²

After joining the choir, Cindy Nelson responded shyly but positively to the invitations to musical, promotional and cultural leadership. Importantly, Nelson has shared her lived experience as a *Noongar* person with the choir: the joys, challenges and the traumas. She has developed her musical, language and public relations skills. Nelson recalled the first time she hosted a concert, laughing as she said 'they couldn't get the microphone offa me.'⁶³ She attributes the choir to helping her to find her own voice. Her increasing knowledge of *Noongar* has led to teaching language and songs in schools and in the community and, consequently, improving her professional qualifications. Nelson recounted that the 'choir has made me confident to go out there and do this language and speak clearly and loudly about the *Noongar* language.'⁶⁴ She speaks affectionately of her choir experience, understanding it as a blending of the people, learning about other cultures, the language, the music, the comfort and acceptance.

Other Indigenous members have built up the confidence to develop their musical skills beyond the choir. Together with her daughter, Pat Oakley auditioned and was accepted for professional tuition, and performed in Deborah Cheetham's opera *Pecan Summer*, describing

⁵⁷ Vigus, 'Application for Music in Communities Award.'

⁵⁸ Madjartil Moorna, *Madjartil Moorna Songbook*, 9.

⁵⁹ Mourach explained that she was not an elder, as the title of elder is an honour bestowed by other elders. This has not occurred. Both 'significant senior' and 'the spiritual heart of the choir' have come from choir members. Mourach, nonetheless, regards these references to herself as an honour. Karl Mourach, interview with author, 28 May 2010.

⁶⁰ Madjartil Moorna, *Madjartil Moorna Songbook*, 9.

⁶¹ Madjartil Moorna, *Madjartil Moorna Songbook*, 9.

⁶² Mourach, interview.

⁶³ Cindy Nelson, interview with author, 28 May 2010.

⁶⁴ Nelson, interview.

it as ‘One of the most wonderfully empowering and life changing experiences that has ever happened.’⁶⁵

Madjtil Moorna is not strictly an *a cappella* choir, and is often accompanied by guitar, which helps with pitch, clap sticks and other percussion. The overall sound of the choir is representative of the natural voice that is often preferred within community choral singing. There is little concentration on technique and blending. Lloyd described the choir as a loose rowdy bunch ‘even in performance style,’⁶⁶ which appeals to community and other events because of their fun and generally ‘pumped’ delivery of songs.⁶⁷ The repertoire includes children’s songs such as *Inanay* and *Serra Ray*,⁶⁸ popular songs such as *My Island Home* by Neil Murray, *Yil Lull* by Joe Geia,⁶⁹ and original compositions by its musical directors. They also perform symbolic songs like *I Am Australian* by Bruce Woodley and Dobe Newton, which is made more relevant by the opening first verse being sung by Indigenous singers only and by the inclusion of a *Noongar* translation of the chorus.

The *Sorry Song* plays a unique role in the choir’s repertoire. Its composer, Kerry Fletcher, was encouraged by social justice activist Robyn Slarke to write a song that expressed the need to say ‘sorry’ to the Stolen Generations.⁷⁰ In the 1990s Slarke, the Director of Cultural Events for the Western Australian Native Title Working Group, ‘formed the Coexistence Choir specifically to promote Aboriginal culture, indigenous rights and the principle of “coexistence” enshrined in Native Title law.’⁷¹ Fletcher was a member of the Coexistence Choir, performed with a number of *a cappella* ensembles, including Hammer and Tongues, and has composed many songs. Neither Slarke nor Fletcher are indigenous, but both have had long-term relationships with Indigenous people, and have witnessed the grief of separation and lasting pain caused by the process of the forced removal of children. Fletcher has a strong empathy with her Aboriginal friends and a long-term commitment to reconciliation. She commented that this strong emotional connection enabled the original composition of the *Sorry Song* to be achieved in one evening.⁷² The song was written in 1998 and revised in 2008:

One word, one word (x 7)
If we can now say that we’re sorry
To the people from this land

⁶⁵ Jo Randell, email to author, 5 Aug. 2012. It should be noted that Deborah Cheetham is Madjtil Moorna’s patron. Cheetham is a *Yorta Yorta* (Victorian/New South Wales border) woman. She is a soprano, composer and author. The opera *Pecan Summer* is based on the events surrounding the *Yorta Yorta* walk-off from Cummeragunja in New South Wales into northern Victoria in 1939 in protest of their treatment at the mission (*Deborah Cheetham: Pecan Summer*, accessed 6 Aug. 2012, <www.deborahcheetham.com/pecan_summer>).

⁶⁶ Lloyd, interview.

⁶⁷ Lloyd, interview.

⁶⁸ A popularly recognised children’s song, *Inanay* was performed by Tiddas in the 1990s and became well known when used by ABC TV for promotional purposes. *Serra Ray* means ‘seagull’ in Torres Strait Island Kriol.

⁶⁹ The spelling can vary and the title is generally translated as ‘Sing’ from *Guugu Yimithirr*, a language group based in far north Queensland.

⁷⁰ The request was a general one to a number of composers as Slarke wanted a song to be written for the first National Sorry Day on 26 May 1998. The composer of *Yil Lull*, Joe Geia, is Lloyd’s father.

⁷¹ Robyn Slarke, email to author, 16 Aug. 2012.

⁷² Kerry Fletcher, interview with author, 20 May 2010.

They cry, they cry, their children were stolen
 They still wonder why
 Sing, sing loud, break through the silence
 Sing sorry across this land
 We cry, we cry, their children were stolen
 Now no-one knows why
 Sing, sing loud, break through the silence
 Sing sorry across this land
 We sing with our hearts, respect for each and everyone
 Together, with hope burning strong (x2)
 Sing, sing loud, we've broken the silence
 Let 'sorry' start healing our land (x3)

The *Sorry Song* has been performed by choirs across Australia, assisted by its inclusion in a songbook for children. It is also part of the content of the German school curriculum on Australian Studies. The song has stimulated many school projects within and outside Australia. Like The Apology itself, however, the song has also been the subject of controversy. It was banned by a school in New South Wales because of its political positioning. Expressing sentiments similar to those that led former Prime Minister John Howard to refuse to say sorry to the Stolen Generations, parents at the school successfully campaigned for its exclusion from curriculum.⁷³

Although originally composed in 1998, the *Sorry Song* anticipated a moment in Australian history, the formal Apology to the Stolen Generations by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in February 2008. Madjitol Moorna performed the *Sorry Song* on the day of The Apology, watched by thousands of people on a large television screen on the Perth Esplanade. As the choir sang, the audience was also drawn into the song, many people joining the final chorus which 'was sung over and over ... the concluding "SORRY" was met with rousing cheers. There were also many tears.'⁷⁴ The official annual Sorry Day event in Wellington Park in the city of Perth is one of the key performances in Madjitol Moorna's calendar, when the *Sorry Song* and other songs from its repertoire are performed to mark the occasion.

The *Sorry Song* is accompanied by guitar and is mostly sung in unison, although an ostinato of 'One word' provides a structured harmonic introduction and its concluding chorus is performed with an improvised harmony.⁷⁵ Unlike the majority of Madjitol Moorna's songs, the *Sorry Song* is not an Indigenous composition, and the lyrics, including lines such as 'If we can now say that we're sorry, to the people from this land' and 'They cry, they cry, their children were stolen, they still wonder why,' are words the settler majority might wish to express to the Indigenous minority upon a conscious recognition of the impact of colonisation. The acknowledgement of pain and sorrow is then made emotionally mutual: 'We cry, we cry, their children were stolen, now no-one knows why.' The collective endeavour of reconciliation is

⁷³ Fletcher, interview. See also *Sorry Song*, by Kerry Fletcher, <www.sorrysong.com.au> and Katelyn Barney "'Sing Loud, Break through the Silence": Musical Responses to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations,' *Perfect Beat*, in press.

⁷⁴ Slarke, *A Small but Mighty Choir Sings "SORRY" and Participates in Australia's National Apology*.

⁷⁵ The original had 'One day,' which was changed after The Apology.

explicitly articulated in the final verse: 'We sing with our hearts, respect for each and everyone, together, with hope burning strong.' The chorus further invites a united journey: 'Sing, sing loud, break through the silence, sing sorry across this land' and, more potently, the final line written since *The Apology*: 'Sing, sing loud, we've broken the silence, let "sorry" start healing our land.'

Although Fletcher is not a member of Madjtil Moorna, she has friendships with various members of its leadership and has often attended or taken part in the choir's performances of the *Sorry Song*. The song was added to its repertoire in 2007 when Slarke brought it along for consideration.

The *Sorry Song* speaks overtly about and to the process of reconciliation. Its lyrics and narrative suggest that it should be a song performed by a non-Indigenous choir. Nevertheless, the Indigenous members of the choir appreciate the ability of the song to capture the acknowledgement of past wrong-doings, the need for recognition of ongoing effects, and the healing that is being sought. Some of its emotional intensity had been brought about by that 2008 performance, which has become the affective anchor for repeat performances, setting up an 'intertextual reference' that subsequently generates layered associations or meanings.⁷⁶ Mourach has often retold the story of the effect of singing the *Sorry Song* in the rehearsal prior to *The Apology*, of how she and Morrison cried and clung to each other. Morrison said that the performance itself prompted Indigenous singers and audience members to cry openly, engendering a 'mass healing.'⁷⁷ When the song is performed by Madjtil Moora, emotion is amplified by the combined voices, the visual presentation of racial harmony, the direct reference to healing, and the imagining of a future where these all coexist. This emotion has become inherently engraved into the choir as a whole. It is also reinforced through personal stories shared by the Indigenous members of the choir.

Drawing on traditional and contemporary Indigenous practices, storytelling is seen as an integral part of the choir. Some of these stories spill out of songs, emerge in the occasional cultural sharing evenings that are scheduled into the choir's program, or are generated in and through public performance. The stories include declarations of shame and pain, the heartache of family dysfunction, and the generational effects of the forced removals. One choir member described a particular storytelling session as 'open, honest and tough on people.'⁷⁸ These internal and external events can be filled with significant emotion. They also provide access to greater clarification of events and issues once absent in mainstream Australian history. Choir members share cross-cultural emotional responses that enable the construction of relational histories.

The audience for the storytelling is, of course, the dominant membership of the choir: the non-Indigenous. Often an interest in Aboriginal culture and history, or active involvement with the reconciliation process, is the motivation for membership, so the song is delivered to an audience with an investment in wanting to know more. Singing is also perceived as a comfortable, 'soft' form of cross-cultural engagement. The rehearsals and other gatherings are

⁷⁶ Timothy Rice, 'Reflections on Music and Meaning: Metaphor, Signification and Control in the Bulgarian Case,' *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 10.1 (2001): 30.

⁷⁷ Morrison, interview.

⁷⁸ Sue Dauth, interview with author, 31 May 2010.

regarded as a 'safe place' where members can 'talk about [cultural] issues knowing that there are no threats, no subtleness.'⁷⁹ The *Sorry Song* plays a crucial role by both reflecting upon and encouraging the sharing of these stories.

Madjartil Moorna dwells in the convergence of community music making and reconciliation. The choir has crafted harmony and healing, but this has not been without its challenges. Madjartil Moorna embodies wider social tensions, and it is significant that its music making takes place *because* of cultural difference rather than in spite of it. It experiences the clashes inherent in a musical interaction that attempts to blur cultural boundaries while foregrounding Indigenous experience and expression. At the same time, 'relational, interactional, intersubjective, dialogical and mutually transformative processes' are nurtured.⁸⁰ The inclusion of the *Sorry Song* within the choir's repertoire plays a unique role. It simultaneously exemplifies and shifts beyond the paradox of reconciliation by explicitly representing and articulating the emotionally grounded knowledge of intercultural relations.

The complexity inherent in this one socio-musical interaction prompts a consideration of the way in which the notions of harmony and healing are far too readily, broadly and simplistically applied in the various discourses surrounding community music-making. As Madjartil Moorna's performance of the *Sorry Song* reveals, harmony and healing can only be achieved when pre-existing and ongoing cross-cultural tensions are expressed. Intricate and intimate threads are necessary in order to weave harmony and healing together: the threads of shared stories, emotional connection, a recapturing and sharing of language and culture, an exploration of the past, a reframing of the present, a vision of the future, and songs that embody meaning and significance.

⁷⁹ Morrison, interview.

⁸⁰ Ottosson, 'Aboriginal Music and Passion: Interculturality and Difference in Australian Desert Towns,' 276.